United Nations E/C.19/2004/6

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
24 February 2004

Original: English

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Third session
New York, 10-21 May 2004
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*
Mandated areas

Information received from non-governmental organizations

Note by the Secretariat

In its report on its second session, held in May 2003, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues identified proposals, objectives, recommendations and areas of possible future action and, through the Economic and Social Council, recommended that States, United Nations system and intergovernmental organizations, indigenous peoples and non-governmental organizations assist in their realization. Information received in this regard from non-governmental organizations is contained in the present document and its addenda.

* E/CN.19/2004/1.

04-24885 (E) 170304

Franciscans International

Statement on indigenous women

1. Franciscans International is a non-governmental organization representing Franciscans worldwide and has among its members indigenous people and many who work with indigenous peoples.

2. Traditionally, indigenous societies have viewed women as representatives of the cycle of life, to be honoured and valued. Many indigenous societies were matriarchal, with women having a strong role in the succession of chiefs, the decision to go to war, the distribution of common resources, etc. Traditional religion and politics protected women, who were always at the centre of those forms of human activity.

3. Today many indigenous women are marginalized twice: by race and by gender. Their security, health and overall level of well-being must be made a priority by the United Nations, its Member States, non-governmental organizations and, most importantly, indigenous peoples themselves.

4. In 2004 we are celebrating the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, which is of great concern to indigenous women. They have called for research on family issues such as domestic violence, child neglect and incest. They have also asked for counselling programmes to address drug abuse, family problems and health concerns, as well as homes for the elderly.

5. Violence against indigenous women and high suicide rates are sometimes by-products of poverty and oppression. One study has shown that Maori women in New Zealand between the ages of 15 and 24 were seven times as likely as non-Maori women to be hospitalized as a result of domestic assault. Native American women experience the highest levels of sexual and domestic abuse of any group in the United States of America. Similar statistics are found elsewhere.

6. Contemporary problems such as child abuse and violence against women are learned behaviours. The cycle can be broken by restoring indigenous women to their traditional place of honour. For example, bride price, traditionally an acknowledgement of the important contribution women made to their families of birth and to recompense the family for its loss, has evolved into the concept of bride purchase, in which women are viewed as a commodity to be bought and sold. An earlier symbol of women's worth is now sometimes a symbol of degradation, when men say, "I bought you. You must do everything I say".

7. To successfully address violence against women we must take into consideration all forms of oppression. Racism, classism and ageism increase the vulnerability of women to both individual and institutionalized acts of violence. The oppression of people of colour, the poor, the elderly, children and others who are marginalized is supported by the same dynamics that maintain the power of a limited few over the majority. Ultimately, working to end violence against indigenous women is also working to end all forms of oppression.

8. Indigenous women have spoken to us of their concerns about:

(a) the breakdown of family traditions;

(b) the loss of culture and language;

(c) individual ambition, rather than tribal sharing.

9. They have stressed the need for programmes that address the loss of tribal values and work to reinstate them, including:

(a) respect for elders and the treasuring of children;

(b) a renewed emphasis on love, sharing and a spiritual connection with all creation;

(c) strong programmes to imbue small children with traditional values before peer groups and modern culture can overtake the elders.

10. Allowing and assisting the resurgence of indigenous languages where they are being lost is an important factor in maintaining culture and tradition. To a large extent, language is women's knowledge, because it is they who are the first teachers of the language and therefore control how it will be learned. Language carries the values, concepts and ways of looking at life that define the group and make it unique.

11. Increasing indigenous women's role in governance is key. Indigenous women need to have the effective ability to promote their own interests, speak for themselves, express their own identities and participate in the development of policies that affect them. They have specifically asked for research on their special health needs, including in relation to nutrition and cancer, physical fitness, diabetes, osteoporosis and narcotics.

12. Indigenous women must have a direct role in setting educational policy, establishing law and disseminating their traditional culture. This will be aided by more positive media attention that recognizes the achievements of indigenous peoples, and by community groups honouring their special contributions. The research requested by indigenous families on family issues, counselling programmes and resources must be carried out. When indigenous women are restored to their traditional place of honour, their own self-esteem will improve, family harmony will increase and the entire community will benefit.